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The Anti-Brexit Cymbeline / Royal Shakespeare Company

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The Anti-Brexit *Cymbeline*

Directed by Melly Still
The Royal Shakespeare Theatre; Stratford-upon-Avon, UK
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In the spring of 2016, the Royal Shakespeare Company staged an overtly political *Cymbeline* in which a post-Brexit Britain appears as a postapocalyptic wasteland, standing in stark contrast to a vibrant, multicultural Italy. The tangled world of Cymbeline's Britain is echoed in the incoherent confusion of its language and the harsh, dystopian set design. In this production, according to director Melly Still, "Britain is decadent, decaying, litter-strewn and neglected," and designer Anna Fleischle sums up this Britain's hostile relationship to the environment: "nature has been concreted over."[1] A stump at center stage is preserved in a glass case, like a museum piece, and the backdrop suggests an abandoned nuclear reactor or rusty missile silo. The British characters' costumes repurpose flour sacks and rags, while the European characters luxuriate in a colorful, fashionable world of exquisite tailoring and cosmopolitan polish. The near future that this production imagines for Britain without the European Union involves the Welsh characters living in literal rubbish pits.

In addition to the set design, Still also uses the especially convoluted language of the play to emphasize the fundamental lack of logic behind Leave votes. As Ros King points out in the program, *Cymbeline*'s "tortuous, semi-grammatical constructions" come to life in performance as "the voicings of half-perceived thoughts, the circuitries of people fearful of saying too much, the outbursts of those who presume too far."[2] In this production, those speaking in Shakespeare's English come across as significantly less clear than the characters in Italy, who speak in the languages appropriate to their nationality. (A linguistic nitpick: characters speak modern French and Spanish, but the Romans speak Latin rather than Italian.) However, their lines, in Shakespeare's English, are projected above them, thus granting them a level of clarity beyond the British characters. Britain is a mess—socially, environmentally, and linguistically—but Europe thrives. The program's overall pro-Remain article about Brexit, penned by *Times* columnist Rachel Sylvester, predicts that a Leave vote will spark another referendum on Scottish independence, and in its wake, "'Little England' will be left shouting on the sidelines, shrill and irrelevant."[3] I would very much like to have seen this production on June 24, immediately after the Brexit vote.

As much as this is a pro-Remain production, though, it is also an explicitly feminist one. Cymbeline and Guiderius are both played by women (Gillian Bevan and Natalie Simpson, respectively); several of the minor characters are, as well. In the program, director Melly Still explains: "*Cymbeline* explores the restoration of order from disorder. To most of us that probably means patriarchal order. I was

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interested in shifting expectations by making both Cymbeline (the monarch) and Guiderius (the heir) women. Rather than the restoration of patrilineal order, it becomes about the possibility of a new order."[4] The casting of the play similarly reflects a careful, forward-looking diversity. Out of nineteen actors named in the program, eight are women and ten are people of color, including Posthumus, Guideria, and Cloten. Only five are white men. This casting itself makes a pointed statement about the diversity of Britain's past and present. In May, the production's ultimate embrace of a diverse, unified, and female-led order seemed to forecast the triumph of peace and hope on the world stage. Turning Guiderius into Guideria sets up the next generation of matrilineal order; in this *Cymbeline*, the future is indeed female.

Thus, both the ruling structure and the beating heart of this production—Innogen (Bethan Cullinane)—are female. Cullinane's clear, natural delivery and the pellucid quality of her acting remind us why great actors are called "stars": they illuminate their productions. In the scene in which Innogen confronts Cloten's corpse and confuses him for Posthumus, her performance is especially powerful. The scene comes across as funny in this production, largely because of a problem caused by the casting: Marcus Griffiths as Cloten is significantly taller and more muscular than Hiran Abeysekera as Posthumus. When Cloten puts on Posthumus's clothes, Griffiths has to unbutton the shirt altogether to avoid bursting the seams. Although the corpse is wrapped in linen, a clever nod to early modern winding sheets, to imagine that Innogen could mistake that gigantic body for small, slight Posthumus beggars belief. Nevertheless, Cullinane manages to make "I know the shape of's leg" utterly heartwrenching despite the evident differences between the physiques of the two men.[5] Her earnest heartbreak cannot entirely overwrite the bleak comedy of the scene, but here, as elsewhere in the performance, Cullinane's acting turns a moment that might have been played for cheap laughs into a moment that builds empathy for Innogen's desperate situation.

In fact, startling empathy characterizes the emotions evoked by the most unlikely character in the play: Cloten. Griffiths exudes charisma, and his Cloten comes across as intelligent rather than foolish, a brute but not a clown. If he stands on the side of the Leave voters, he gives them a surprisingly eloquent voice. When Griffiths says, "Britain's a world by itself, and we will nothing pay for wearing our own noses," the force of his personality makes one want to cheer, in spite of every other aspect of Cloten's behavior and character (3.1.13-14). Neither he nor the production crosses the line to try to redeem this would-be rapist and murderer, but Griffiths certainly plays up Cloten's moments of insight and his angry arrogance, while playing down the cloddishness that normally characterizes this villain.

Griffiths and Cullinane stood out even in a cast that as a whole crackled with energy. Gillian Bevan plays a fierce Cymbeline, Hiran Abeysekera a passionate Posthumus, James Clyde a creepily professorial Duke (i.e., Queen). The plot of *Cymbeline* does not, of course, map precisely onto the political situation of spring 2016; for one thing, the European Union is not a conquering empire, like Rome. Nevertheless, this production rises above many others I have seen from the RSC: powerful, creative, and pointed. And on this night, the cast elevated it

even more. One of the great thrills of live theatre derives from the joy of seeing talented professionals doing excellent work in front of one's eyes, and this performance provided that joy in spades.

Notes

1. "Staging Cymbeline," *Cymbeline* (Stratford-upon-Avon: Royal Shakespeare .Company, 2016, n.p.).
2. Ros King, "Two Ways at Once," *Cymbeline* (Stratford-upon-Avon: Royal Shakespeare Company, 2016, n.p.).
3. Rachel Sylvester, "A World by Itself," *Cymbeline* (Stratford-upon-Avon: Royal Shakespeare Company, 2016, n.p.).
4. "Staging Cymbeline," n.p.
5. William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, ed. J.M. Nosworthy (Arden, second series; London: Thompson, 2002), 4.2.309. Cited parenthetically hereafter.

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